



Editorial

Stuart is a man in his late twenties who volunteers at Merrymeeting Center for Child Development, where I work. He is proficient in five languages (“if you count Latin, which is a dead language,” Stuart allows), and he’s a World War II history buff.

“In addition to the six million Jews Hitler murdered,” Stuart said, “he exterminated another four million “imperfect” beings of all kinds.”

“I think about that,” I said. “If Jason and Joshua were children in Hitler’s Germany, he would have “exterminated” my sons.” The thought, the injustice, turns my stomach.

“Hitler would have killed me,” Stuart said. Stuart has Asperger’s Syndrome.

We shared a look in silence, contemplating unspeakable horrors.

Stuart is an amazing person. Although he’s struggled with compulsiveness and social cues his entire life, he was not diagnosed as having a disorder until he was 24 years old. I asked Stuart once why he volunteers at Merrymeeting Center. He shrugged, thought about it, and said, “I guess I’m trying to find out more about what I may have been like as a child.” Stuart confesses kinship to our most troubled children, those new to the Center who rave and tantrum and destroy the things around them. “I remember feeling that way sometimes,” he says.

One day I escorted a woman on a tour of the Center. The mother had a child who had been diagnosed as having autism nearly two years previously. The child engaged in severe aggression and tantrum behaviors, was not yet toilet trained, and had no language. The woman sighed, near tears. “I am sure my son will end up in an institution,” she said.

Stuart was entering data into a computer at the back of the room. Hearing this gloomy pronouncement, he lifted his head and smiled. “I’m somewhat autistic myself,” he said. He just left it at that, as if one could draw one’s own conclusions. I introduced Stuart as one of our volunteers. He stood up, shook the mother’s hand and chatted, without apparent self-consciousness, about himself—his skills, his achievements, his challenges, his dreams.

I was flabbergasted. As the mother of two children with autism myself, I marveled at the precious gift of himself Stuart made to this frightened mother intuitively, spontaneously, freely. And it dawned on me: This tall, red-bearded, exuberant man (who speaks five languages and helps special kids) reflects the alpha and omega of our lives; for while Stuart volunteers with our children for a glimpse into his past, he provides the families we serve with a vision of our future.

Thank you Stuart, from the bottom of my heart.

--Lora Perry, MS, Editor